

**Communities By Design**, a  
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education  
organization, in cooperation with the  
**City of Redwood City**,  
is pleased to present:

# The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



## DESIGNING THE INEVITABLE: CREATING A HIGH-DENSITY AND LIVABLE INNER CITY

2005-06 SEASON: FORUM #7  
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 2006  
LITTLE FOX THEATER  
2209 BROADWAY  
REDWOOD CITY  
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On April 5, 2006, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted the seventh presentation of the 2005-2006 Forum season, with a presentation by Gordon Price, Director of the City Program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). For six consecutive terms, Mr. Price was elected as a Vancouver City Councillor (also known as councilmember in the United States). Mr. Price spoke on “Designing the Inevitable: Creating a High-Density and Livable Inner City.”

### **Vancouverism**

Gordon Price realizes that people attach powerful ideas and images to certain places. Growing up, California represented “the good life” to Price, and Disneyland was a mecca. Likewise today, people associate a sophisticated, modern lifestyle to Vancouver, BC. Due to its sheer livability and unique characteristics such as urban parks and tall, narrow sky scrapers, the city of Vancouver has put a new word in the dictionary: “Vancouverism.”

The complex blend of density, diversity, smart design, transportation access, and plentiful green space has put Vancouver on the map as an extremely desirable place to live. As professionals and observers of community design, we can look at successful cities like Vancouver for inspiration, but Price cautions against mimicking them too closely. Vancouver’s density has worked so well in part because of its unique geographic location. The City of Vancouver is bounded by the Pacific Ocean on one side and mountains on the other, which create an automatic urban growth boundary. Downtown Vancouver has been forced to make the most of its two square miles by building vertically.

## Height Does Not Equal Density

People often confuse height with density, Mr. Price points out. It is hard to believe that a higher building may be less dense than a lower building. But if unit sizes are large (which is a trend that is occurring), higher buildings can easily be less dense; it's just that more space is available for fewer people. In these high-rise, low-density locations, it is difficult to maintain good retail vitality because there are not enough people to support neighborhood-serving retail. (One general rule of thumb is that you need 5,000 people to support a full-size grocery store.)

Mr. Price concedes that there will always be people who automatically link height to density, think that density will lead to overcrowding, and fear that overcrowding will lead to social decay. So although they don't articulate it, critics often presuppose that building height directly translates to social decay. Understanding that high density is not the same as overcrowding is key to overcoming this argument.

“We had to find a way to make density livable.”

- Gordon Price

While a good city accommodates a diverse array of growth ideologies, Mr. Price believes that communities that fight growth in any form often make many sacrifices for their non-growth platforms and do not fully understand the trade-offs and consequences of their decisions.

## Creating Place

The City of Vancouver has experienced more growth in its core than any other city in North America. In 1986, the population of downtown Vancouver was 43,000; in 2005 it was 85,000 people, and it is projected to be 120,000 by 2021. But Vancouver's evolution to one of the most livable cities in North America has taken time, a change in social status, and a new Director of Planning who believed in creating not just more buildings, but *place*. (The Planning Director refers to it as “neighborliness.”)

People don't buy into the simple promise of “economic development,” Mr. Price admits; instead, you have to explicitly show them what they are getting in return for the growth, such as parks, community centers, school sites, childcare centers, non-market housing sites, seawalls, bikeways, roads, public art, and other improvements.

A key principle, according to Mr. Price, is that “growth must support growth,” and development in turn should benefit the citizens. A healthy growth cycle occurs when private developers contribute to the public realm, encouraging the next developer to follow suit, which quickly adds more value to their development and the City as a whole. “Public value adds private value,” Mr. Price asserts, and it's a win-win situation.

A key ingredient of a healthy street environment is keeping elements on a small scale. Though Vancouver is known for its high-rise buildings, the real focus is at the ground-floor level, which ensures a healthy retail climate. Mr. Price stressed the importance of having a full service (30,000-40,000 sq ft) grocery store within walking distance (1 square mile) of each neighborhood. Having restaurants and people walking along the streets creates more interaction with the rest of the community, and puts more “eyes on the street,” which in turn makes the community safer.

“It's not about height, it's about what happens on the ground.”

- Gordon Price

## Recipe for Smart Growth

With Vancouver as a model, Mr. Price used the four-ingredient recipe from Don Chen of Smart Growth America as his formula for success: density, diversity, design and transportation access.

Vancouver has created density by placing fairly thin residential towers over podiums (with floor plates for the towers not above 8000 square feet), with a minimum of 80 feet between the towers. This creates privacy, great views, and room for a green horizon. "Great architecture requires good materials," Mr. Price asserts, and managing views and view corridors is also important. In dense locations, the spaces between the buildings are the most important places, and the City requires the semi-private space between the towers to be landscaped and green. Open space needs to be functional, beautiful, active, and available for families. At the street level, the City has a requirement that there cannot be any blank walls. Vancouver has even pushed development back from the waterfront in places, to make room for active urban parks, soccer fields, and a continuous seawall around the city.

As far as diversity, Mr. Price admits it's a volatile subject, but a changing market needs a creative approach. Change is better received when it occurs incrementally. Housing must be available for everyone, and Mr. Price recommends that twenty percent of homes should be non-market (affordable). Mr. Price recommends using "resiliency" (how we are going to respond to change) as an even more important measure of success than sustainability. "Our community's ability to be resilient will have to do with how diverse we are," Mr. Price asserts.

The mission statement for Vancouver, borrowed from St. Paul, Minnesota, is "more natural, more urban, more connected" and Vancouver offers easy access to transportation options. Although the infrastructure is relatively modern, Vancouver still functions like a nineteenth century city, with no freeways in the inner city. The streetcar lines still function as transportation corridors.

Alternative forms of transportation are extremely important in Vancouver as well. It has been shown that those who choose to make walking or biking part of their commute live healthier lives. Mr. Price hopes that more people start to understand the connection between community design and public health. As people go more often by "feet, bike and blade," the number of registered vehicles in Vancouver is declining and the car has become the alternative form of transportation downtown. One of the keys to this is a continuous system of paths for feet and wheels (bikes and blades) – Price strongly recommends separate paths for these users – with loops and links so you never have to re-trace your steps. In Mr. Price's experience, once the system is signed and seen on people's "mental maps," people will use it seamlessly and you will move beyond recreation to transportation.

"Unless we find ways in our cities where we can move about and be active, our kids will live shorter lives than we do."

- Gordon Price

Mr. Price ended by challenging local communities to draw the generations that grew up in their towns, back home to a healthy, proud, urban place. He asked participants as he concluded, "What does your city aspire to be?"

"The first job of politicians is to articulate a vision that gives people some hope."

- Gordon Price